Are We Having Fun Yet?
Putting more positive into injury prevention

Have you heard about the international bestseller “Fish: A remarkable way to boost morale and improve results” by Stephen C. Lundin? It’s the story of a fictional company that transformed itself by applying lessons learned from Seattle’s Pike Place Fish Market. The story has evolved into “Fish Tales” – a book and audio series featuring dozens of real-life examples of companies that increased morale and productivity and decreased burnout and turnover by adopting the “Fish” philosophy. And of course, several consulting firms focus on teaching the “Fish” philosophy to businesses and inspiring them to put it into “play.”

What is the Fish Philosophy?

This transformational philosophy is neither complicated nor profound. It’s not even new. It’s reflected in the last word of the previous paragraph – play. Indeed, the idea of adding humor or fun into the workplace has been around for decades. I worked with a consulting firm in the mid-1980’s that promoted this “fun” or “playfulness” philosophy and I wrote about it in my October, 1997 ISHN column, entitled “Lightening your load with laughter: Coaching comes easier with a little humor.”

That earlier ISHN article was more conceptual than practical. I described five types of humor – pun, exaggeration, surprise, silliness, and put-down – and I gave examples of each. My aim was to make the reader smile or chuckle, and thereby demonstrate the “magic” of a little humor. Indeed, objective research
has demonstrated physical and psychological health benefits from humor. Here I focus on application, and relate the “Fish” philosophy to industrial safety.

The “Fish” Philosophy in Action

Visit the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle and you'll immediately understand the “Fish” philosophy. You'll see Fish flying through the air between pairs of fishmongers, especially skilled at throwing and catching Fish in creative ways. Sometimes customers try their hand at catching Fish. You'll hear laughter from everyone – sellers, buyers, and numerous onlookers. This team of fishmongers transformed their routine jobs into an exciting and inspirational culture by adding some fun into their daily operations.

The “fun” philosophy of the Seattle Fish mongers is disseminated worldwide through books, computer software, videotapes, and audiotapes. A team of these Fish mongers will travel to your organization or celebration site (for a fee, of course), and demonstrate their remarkable skills at throwing and catching Fish. In the process they will explain four tenants of their philosophy: 1) have more fun, 2) own the process, 3) choose your attitude, and 4) make someone’s day.

Fish Tales

The book and audiotapes on “Fish Tales” include testimonials from people who have injected intermittent fun into their daily work routines. Reading these will give you useful ideas, but it’s not difficult to create your own applications. These can be inspired by observing others.
If you fly Southwest Airlines, a client of the consulting firm that sells the “Fish” philosophy, you’ll likely see examples of routine-breaking humor that reduces the distress of air travel. I once heard the Southwest Airline flight attendant ask, “Has anyone lost a black wallet with five 20-dollar bills?” When the passengers looked up, he added, “Now that I have your attention, let me tell you about the safety features on this aircraft.” Later he announced, “I’m about to make the flight attendants more attractive. We are dimming the lights for night travel.”

Joanne Dean, Safety Director of The Gale Construction Company, told me how she attempted to break up the serious façade in the large reception area of a major printing company. She periodically visited this New Jersey business and noted how solemn everyone seemed while waiting their turn. Most would not look up to give new visitors eye contact. Even Joanne’s friendly “hello” was often ignored.

On one particular day, however, this safety pro was not overlooked. She entered the lobby and skillfully performed three cartwheels across the reception area. She then took a bow to the applause of many onlookers. But, of course, there were some who never noticed. For these individuals, it takes more than a few athletic cartwheels to break the routine of serious waiting.

You don’t have to be an athlete or gymnast to add some fun to your work group. For example, I’ve started off a few university meetings with laughter by placing a rubber dog nose over my own nose. That small change makes any face comical and is sure to bring a welcomed laugh. My dog nose is
conservative compared to other fun items available in the standard novelty shop. You could wear duck feet or an entire chicken suit to work – on casual Friday, of course. Or imagine the fun you could have with a “whoopee cushion” or a replica of some undesirable waste like dog feces or human vomit.

**Safety is So Serious**

Injury prevention is serious business – no doubt. But can’t safety be more fun? Unfortunately, our language puts us at a disadvantage. How can an “accident investigation” be pleasant? How can a safety meeting be positive when it starts with a display of statistics showing a significant lost-time injury rate? And how can workers feel a boost in morale when their safety performance is judged only by how many negative consequences they avoided rather than positive consequences achieved?

I was recently reminded of the up-tight mindset of some safety pros when I was asked to remove a number of my PowerPoint cartoons from an upcoming keynote address at a company safety conference. An intriguing feature of this request was that the committee members themselves found no problem with the illustrations, but they presumed the CEO and senior staff would be offended. I complied with the request, of course, but I was tempted to present these cartoons anyway in order to show the safety committee that top management can loosen up and have fun too!

The most objectionable of the eliminated slides is depicted here. I use it to illustrate how the mindset of optimism or “looking for the positive” can impact a
person’s perception. If this illustration offends you, I apologize. My only defense is “Lighten Up!”

<Insert Figure About Here>

**The Real Benefit of Safety Incentives**

Safety incentives have caused substantial controversy. A key issue is whether the incentive should be connected to outcomes or behaviors. Although it’s much easier to administer an incident-based reward program than one based on safety-related behaviors, these programs stifle the reporting of injuries and decrease the perception of personal control over an organization’s safety record. Behavior-based rewards place the focus on process activities under direct control of the participants.

But what is the purpose of a safety incentive program? Is it about behavior modification? Come on, do you really think the trinkets we use to recognize safe work practices actually change behavior? In fact, behavior-based rewards are given when the desired behavior occurs. So what behavior are you modifying? None – you are merely supporting behavior that is already occurring.

Yes, a large financial incentive can influence behavior. What behavior? With safety incentives, it’s important to examine whether the behavior modified really contributes to injury reduction. If safety incentives motivate the occurrence of safety-process activities, they are useful. But such safety-incentive programs are rare. In fact, offering financial bonuses for safety performance can feel insulting. Why should people need an incentive to prevent the possibility of personal injury to themselves and coworkers?
So I recommend another purpose for safety incentives. It’s not about behavior modification or motivation. It’s about adding some fun to the work culture. Delivering trinkets or mementos for safety-related activities, perhaps with a game format like “Safety Bingo” or “At-Risk Jeopardy,” connects positive vibes to injury prevention. Thus, safety incentives do more for attitude than behavior. They link positive playful feelings with the ongoing extra effort needed to maintain an injury-free workplace.

Once an employee challenged the safety incentive program I helped to create with the statement, “Giving safety trinkets for safety activities is Mickey Mouse. I wouldn’t subject my granddaughter to such nonsense.” I retorted with, “I love Mickey Mouse and I bet your granddaughter loves him too.”

Further discussion revealed the perception among many workers that the presumed purpose of the incentives was “to modify behavior.” This was insulting. A line worker added, “We don’t need trinkets to motivate us to be safe. And, we naturally want to prevent the possibility of personal injury to our coworkers.”

By introducing and encouraging the mindset of “incentives for fun” rather than “incentives for behavior modification,” I reduced employee resistance and got the buy-in needed to move ahead with the safety incentive program. Then, when the employees got fully engaged in the playful routine-breaking process of earning and spending behavior-based safety credits, they adopted an ownership attitude regarding behavior-based safety incentives at their plant.
In Conclusion

Injury-prevention is certainly a critically important challenge – one we need to take seriously. But serious work can still be fun. We often take the fun out of safety with our compliance and enforcement-focused language, and with an evaluation system that tracks failures rather than successes. And when we do implement an achievement-based incentive/reward program, we insult people with the rationale that the program was designed to modify their behavior.

Safety language can be more positive. Safety performance can be readily evaluated by counting success stories instead of failures. And, a safety-incentive program can be implemented to boost morale rather than to motivate behavior change. You will choose to make these changes when you realize the value in interjecting more fun and playfulness into industrial safety. I hope this presentation has helped to move you toward this positive, “Fish” philosophy.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Center for Applied Behavior Systems
Virginia Tech

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions teach organizations how to get a workforce more positive and optimistic about achieving and maintaining an injury-free workplace. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.
OH! WHAT A NICE COAT.

YES, IT'S NOT OFTEN ONE SEES A SILVER LINING.